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Green Social Work and its Implication for China's Development

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Abstract:

Green social work (Dominelli, 2012a) has been significant in introducing new issues into environmental debates, and increasing its centrality to social work practice. These have included: the mainstreaming of environmental considerations so that the physical environment becomes firmly embedded within ecological perspectives and professional preoccupations, a widening of the theoretical and practice base to ensure that social and environmental justice are considered integral to any environmental (in its widest sense) involvement by social workers; highlighting the need to think of innovative approaches to socio-economic development if meeting human needs is to 'not to cost the earth'; and making disaster interventions core elements in the social work repertoire of knowledge, skills, capacity building and curriculum formulation.

In this paper, we consider the challenges of China's rapid industrialisation and its implications for rural people migrating into cities, the urban populations that receive them and environmental degradation. We then introduce the idea of green social work and explain its importance in meeting the environmental challenges the social work profession faces in the 21st century. We then discuss the implications of green social work for China's development in the context of environmental crisis which is one of the most pressing challenges to emerge from the country's rapid economic development.

Keywords:

Green Social Work, environmental crises, China, Locality Specific and Culturally Relevant practice, Resilience, Sustainable Development

Introduction

China is a hazard-prone country with ‘natural’ disasters such as earthquakes, landslides, hurricanes, flooding, snowstorms, heatwaves, drought and desertification being regular features that test its resilience. Additionally, there are the (hu)man-made disasters linked to air, soil and water pollution and other industrial hazards including climate change. These events cost China substantial sums of money and many days of lost production to address. According to UNISDR’s *Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction 2015*, in China, 557,438,270 life years were lost between 1990 and 2012, which equals a per capita loss of 162 days (UNISDR, 2015); and 13.6 billion USD economic loss in 2015 (CRED & UNISDR, 2015). A specific example is the Wenchuan earthquake of 2008 which directly caused nearly 70,000 people died and 130 billion USD economic loss (National Bureau of Statistics of the PRC, 2009). Addressing these hazards by mitigating risk, developing adaptation strategies and resilient reconstruction action plans and engaging residents at community level in coproducing solutions to the problems they face are important tools that can be brought to bear on such situations. Meeting the objectives of reducing losses attributable to natural and (hu)man-made disasters is a matter that involves many stakeholders – government at all levels; physical scientists, social scientists, professionals, especially those belonging to the health, social work and engineering professions, local residents, and businesses. This is where green social work has much to offer throughout the disaster cycle from mitigation to reconstruction and prevention.

Developing responses that are locality specific and culturally relevant is a challenge to the entire social work profession, including disaster risk reduction (DRR) and disaster risk management (DRM) enterprise, and requires working in effective transdisciplinary teams. Dominelli (2012, 2016) argues that transdisciplinary teams are more than physical and social scientists from different disciplines working in one team to solve a common problem. She suggests that an effective transdisciplinary team is one that involves scientific and ‘indigenous’ /local/community expertise in ‘doing science differently’ by coproducing a common analytical framework and culturally situated analysis to solve an agreed problem or issue.

In this article, we argue that social workers, particularly green social workers (Dominelli, 2012) have a pivotal role to play in such transdisciplinary teams by coordinating activities between the different stakeholders, translating scientific knowledge to residents and ‘indigenous’/local/community knowledge to scientists, mobilizing communities to participate in coproduction activities, assisting in the implementation of agreed plans, and evaluating outcomes. One of the authors, Hok Bun Ku (2011, 2015a, 2015b), has already used green social work in Pingzhai, Yunnan Province, in Yingxiu and Ya’an, Sichuan province, and Conghua, Guangdong Province. For this article, we explore the tenets of Green Social Work and their use in China, focusing specifically on the works that Hok Bun Ku and his colleagues and residents have undertaken in Yunnan.

The Need for Green Social Work in China: Responding to Unsustainable Development and the Environmental Crises in China

China is currently at the crossroads of responding to its environmental crises, through what we term a second revolution in thinking about the relationship between residents, social development, environmental resources and sustainability. China has developed industrially very rapidly in the past three decades, and this has confronted it with unanticipated environmental degradation and social dislocation as people migrated from rural into urban areas. There have been 274 million (National Bureau of Statistics of PRC, 2015) people migrating to the cities from the countryside in 2014. These developments have produced enormous challenges for a country committed to raising its people out of poverty through industrialization in the shortest possible period. Using a market economy has produced economic and social contradictions that have created environmental crises, stressed social relationships and rural livelihoods, and engendered precariousness among the urban migrants. The 12th and 13th five-year plans propose to maintain the rapid development of the economy, while strengthening social development. Within these policy documents, the government has begun to emphasize the needs of the people, focus on the co-ordination of sustainable development, and protect and improve people’s livelihood as measures to promote social equality and justice. Despite these noble aspirations, China faces the challenge of responding to the demands of the 250 million rural to urban migrant workers – the *nongmingong* (migrant labor), with ‘quasi-’, incomplete statuses and

identities for full recognition as citizens of China with rights to decent working and living conditions, health and well-being and dignity. Hence, how to resolve the *nongminggong* and *sannong* problem¹ is now a focal point for social development processes (Pun & Ku, 2011).

The 12th and 13th five-year plans of the Chinese government propose to remedy the chasm created by the depopulation of rural areas for rapid urbanization in mega-cities, or what Dominelli (2010) calls hyper-urbanization. The principal goal of urbanization is gradually to transform the rural migrant population into urban citizens, and thoroughly transfer rights to and the management of land to the market and capital investment. This will produce a shift in landownership in China from the state to agribusiness and property developers at the expense of rural people's usufruct rights to land. Through this process, rural farmers will be turned into urban workers to complete industrialization. Moreover, this will ensure that the migrant population will lose its disadvantaged status to become the liberated urban citizen (Pun & Ku, 2011).

How can farmers live fulfilling, dignified and self-sufficient lives when land is rapidly encroached on by financial capital? Placing a price on a natural good, namely land, as economists have done has simply increased its utility value by subjecting it to market discipline, projecting it as a scarce commodity that fetches premium prices and encouraging expansion onto green field sites to maximize profits by reducing costs. Appropriating land for high density development has increased pollution so that today's cities account for 70 percent of the greenhouse gases that drive climate change. Moving away from cities as the main drivers of economic expansion could promote community-led, renewable forms of energy consumption and sustainable development to drive local economies in novel directions. Land transfers to entrepreneurs in China has resulted in shifts in identity and spatial transformations that are inimical to the traditional customs and practices that sustain livelihoods in farming communities. While the relocation of identity from a rural to an urban one is inherent in industrialization, it does not provide the basis for solving the *sannong* problem. On the contrary, the means of production that are integral to sustaining

¹ *Sannong* problem can be literally translated as 'three rural problems' – which are peasants, villages and agriculture.

farmers' livelihoods and their basic protection through their land rights will be lost and farming populations will endure further woes (Ku, 2011 & 2003).

Behind the expansion of industrial parks are often the bitter lives of migrant workers and peasants (Pun & Chan, 2012) who may have become homeless and dispossessed of their lands. Older farmers are further disadvantaged because when they are stripped of their means of production and subsistence, they cannot sell their labour power because they are considered too old to be employed in factories and other relocated manufacturing corporations. Rural reconstruction and urbanization, in the name of 'city and countryside integration', continue the transnational capital dominance (Ye, 2009; Zhang & Shan, 2012). According to Shi and Hang (2014), after the acquisition of contracted land, only 3.9 percent of farmers received job placement; after the houses were demolished, only 1.8 percent of the people got the job placement. In China, the living standard of the 46 percent of land-lost farmers are descending. They became the new poverty group with "no farming land, no employment opportunity, no social security, no venture funding". This process has brought about the process of proletarianization of farmers and migrant workers in China. Not only do they lose their community ties and connections with wider society, they are also placed in incredibly difficult living conditions. It is impossible to ensure employment and implement other forms of social security under such circumstances (Ku, 2013; Pun & Lu, 2010).

This mode of industrialization is not driven by the needs of rural communities or initiated by farmers themselves. Instead, the alliance between industrial and real estate capital facilitates further land enclosures without unifying villages and cities. And, it cannot neither solve the *sannong* problem nor the predicaments of migrant workers. However, the further dismantling of rural society may shake the foundation of China's stability and commitment to harmonious social relations.

Capitalist mode of development is not people-centred and environment-friendly, but instead privileges profit-making for corporations and capital. The maximization of profit becomes the primary goal, which destroys other forms of locally-based socio-economic development, fails to resolve the contradictions that foster inequalities in contemporary Chinese society, and produce serious environmental degradations that produce the environmental crises evident in China's cities, e.g., air pollution in its major cities and the damage these do to people's health (Pun & Ku,

2011).

Environmental degradation is critical in China, severely affecting the country's biophysical environment and biodiversity, food safety, human health and even economic development, and represents an issue of extreme concern to the Chinese government. Rapid industrialization, commercialization of agriculture, and excessive consumption since the economic reform in 1980s are main contributors to the problem. According to a recent report, *Greenpeace City Rankings 2015 Summary: Measuring the impact of air pollution in 366 Chinese cities in 2015* (2016), the national average concentration of PM 2.5 in all 366 cities was 50.2 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, much higher than the standard of 35 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ set by the Chinese government air quality guidelines, let alone the 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ of World Health Organization (WHO)'s air quality guidelines (Greenpeace, 2016). The Chinese government has recognized the problems and made numerous responses which have been deemed inadequate (Kaiman, 2014)

The connection between industrial pollution and livelihoods was demonstrated in the water pollution that resulted in thousands of dead pigs floating past Shanghai. This was due to an accidental chemical leak of benzene, a known cancer-causing agent, into a tributary of the Huangpu river (Lallanilla, 2013). It is not an isolated incident. However, according to *The Economist*, over half of China's surface water is polluted and cannot be treated as drinkable, and one-quarter of it is dangerous that it cannot be used even for industrial purposes. Groundwater is not safer in China as well and about 40 percent of its farmland relies on groundwater for irrigation and an estimated 90 percent is polluted. About 60 percent of the groundwater beneath China's cities is described as 'severely polluted' (Lallanilla, 2013; Song, 2013). Polluted water is not only affecting people's health, but also the development of agriculture in China.

Desertification is another serious problem. Nearly 30 percent of China's surface area is desert. According to Diamond (2005), it is expanding at a rate of more than 67 km^2 every year. The Gobi Desert in the north currently expands by about 950 square miles (2,500 km^2) per year. 90 percent of China's desertification occurs in the west the country due to China's rapid industrialization, overgrazing, large-scale agricultural production and soil erosion (Diamond, 2005; Lallanilla, 2013). Desertification has already reached within 45 km of Beijing, creating problems including those of respiratory problems among the population when the winds shift sand into the city

and other inhabited territories.

Forests cover only 20 percent of China despite its having some of the largest expanses of forested land in the world which can be changed into forest preservation efforts. In 2001, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) listed China as one of the the top 15 countries having the most 'closed forest', i.e., virgin, old growth forest or naturally regrown woods (Wikipedia, 2016). Overall, 12 percent of China's land area, or more than 111 million hectares, is closed forest. The UNEP also estimates that 36 percent of China's closed forests are encountering pressures from high rate of urbanization, industrialization and property development. In 2011, Conservation International also pointed out that the forests of south-west Sichuan is one of the world's ten most threatened forest regions due to disaster and urban development (Pilitzer Center, 2011).

Habitat loss and the drop in biodiversity are the issues closely related to deforestation and desertification. As massive areas of forest are cleared for farmland, bamboo plantations, timber and fuel wood, threatened the survival of animals like pandas. China's issues with species loss outspread far beyond its national borders. According to Wynne Parry (2012), the Chinese market becomes the main source of elephant ivory, rhino horns, and tiger bones (as medicine) and penises (as aphrodisiacs).

All of the above environmental crises are affecting China's economic development, especially agriculture which is directly related to people's livelihoods in both villages and cities and health. What is the role for green social workers in helping China address its socio-economic and environmental crises? What work can they undertake to ensure that China's Reforms are sustainable and life-enhancing? Below, we consider how green social workers can contribute to China's sustainable people-centred economic development and social development simultaneously.

Defining Green Social Work

Green social work brings to bear a particular social justice perspective on environmental, social development, industrialization and urbanization on social problems. We define this below, but wish to indicate that social work has had an ecological perspective for many years (Brofenbrenner, 1979). Despite their historical

credentials in embedding the person-in-the environment, ecological perspectives focused on social and family systems, often neglecting concerns for the *physical* environment and how the use of global material resources impact upon human life. Moving beyond the ecological approach is a recent concern within the profession. Initially, this began with a concern for the physical environment (Rogge, 2000; Besthorn, 2012). Environmental approaches were critiqued by Dominelli (2012) for failing to grapple with industrialization, urbanization and the models of socio-economic development that underpinned capitalism/neoliberalism at the expense of both human beings and planet earth. *Green social work* (Dominelli, 2012) has been significant in introducing new issues in the profession's debates about the environment. These have included: the mainstreaming of environmental considerations so that the physical environment becomes firmly embedded within ecological perspectives and professional preoccupations, a widening of the theoretical and practice base to ensure that social and environmental justice are considered integral to any environmental (in its widest sense) involvement by social workers; highlighting the need to think of innovative approaches to socio-economic development to meet human needs without destroying the environment; and making disaster interventions core elements in the social work repertoire of knowledge, skills, capacity building and curriculum. Thus, green social work is committed to: holistic views of the world; a structural analysis of human and social development; integrating social and environmental justice; challenging neoliberal forms of social development; and highlighting interdependencies among peoples and between peoples and their physical and social environments.

Dominelli (2012) uses green social work, to suggest that greening the profession is key to responding to 21st century challenges which include environmental degradation and implementing social and environmental justice as integral elements within ethical, socially just practice. We explore the implication of green social work for China's development in the context of environmental crises which have emanated from the country's rapid economic development.

Dominelli (2012:25) defines green social work as:

‘a form of holistic professional social work practice that focuses on the: interdependencies amongst people, the social organisation of relationships

between people and the flora and fauna in their natural habitats; and the interactions between socio-economic and physical environmental crises and interpersonal behaviours that undermine the well-being of human beings and planet earth. It proposes to address these issues by arguing for a profound transformation in how people conceptualise the social basis of their society, their relationships with each other, living things and the inanimate world, to: tackle structural inequalities including the unequal distribution of power and resources; poverty; various 'isms'; promote global interdependencies; and utilise limited natural resources including land, air, water and energy sources and minerals for the benefit of all rather than the privileged few. The aim of green social work is to work for the reform of the socio-political and economic forces that have a deleterious impact upon the quality of life of poor and marginalised populations and secure the policy changes and social transformations necessary for enhancing the well-being of people and the planet today and in the future'.

Green social work acknowledges the political nature of the profession (Parry et al., 1979; Dominelli, 1997), including its willingness to defend marginalised and disenfranchised groups and their causes, including those linked to balancing the demands of work in cities with sustaining families and livelihoods in the countryside. A combination of the centralisation of jobs in cities and environmental degradation throughout China imposes costs that marginalized groups bear with little consciousness of their impact upon their lives and those of their families, friends and neighbours. Given the popularity of ever-larger cities globally, we are concerned that if these issues are not addressed, the infrastructures in cities – water, sanitation, power supplies, transportation, housing, schools, and health facilities will become stretched beyond their limits (Schumpeter, 1999). Failure to address these concerns is likely to increase disadvantage throughout a population and with it, the potential for social disorder, because the physical environment becomes more and more stressed to meet the needs of rising numbers of people.

The growth of slums world-wide instances hyper-urbanisation and illustrates planners' and developers' failure to deliver goods and services that meet people's needs sustainably. The United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat) Report in 2014 revealed that 863 million people were living in slums in 2013

compared to 650 million in 1990. That these numbers of people are compelled to live in slums indicates that hyper-urbanisation is failing to meet the needs of rural migrants attracted to cities by the lure of non-existent or poorly paid jobs. In the West, the growth of 'zero hours contracts' and service sector employment that pays a pittance has created a rapid rise in the numbers of working poor people who cannot pay basic bills despite working 70 hours a week in more than one job (Ehenreich, 2002). Their lives epitomise *super-exploitation* in an uncaring neoliberal capitalist system that engulfs them in a spiral of sacrifices that are relieved somewhat by rapidly expanding food-banks. These become edifices of shame, or monuments to the declining welfare states of the West, as poor families seek to deal with starvation and augmenting levels of immiseration.

Green social workers argue that sustainable approaches include providing well-paid, decent jobs and sustainable livelihoods for the poorest inhabitants, in their own local communities. These can be provided by developing opportunities in tune with the environment in the communities in which people already live as suggested by Schumpeter's (1973, 1999) 'small is beautiful' approach to development. Such development would curb growth in highly-congested urban and hyper-urban areas which are unsustainable. Growing urbanisation is touted as an achievement of humanity. Green social workers must challenge this unproven assumption and provide evidence for sustainable alternatives through a collaborative, participative action research approach involving residents and a variety of stakeholders including physical and social scientists working together in local communities.

Green social work prioritises holistic practice and interdependencies between people and the physical environment. Connections between and among peoples are essential in bringing social and environmental justice together. Social workers should lobby politicians to change their priorities to promote environmental justice.

Another reason for engaging with marginalisation and disenfranchisement is to prevent the dumping of toxic materials in poor communities where politicians are less concerned about electoral power than in other locations. Bullard (2000) formulated the term 'environmental racism' to highlight the relationship between the siting of toxic chemicals dumps and residential areas inhabited by poor African Americans in the USA. Poverty, a structural issue for social workers is a factor to be incorporated

fully in greening the profession. This is because poverty exacerbates the impact of disasters, whether natural or (hu)man-made (Pelling, 2003); and affects power relations, and levels of resilience that poor communities can achieve without obtaining additional external resources, especially in knowledge, skills, finances and materials.

Tackling Unequal Power Relations

Power relations symbolize the capacity of individuals, groups, and communities to make their own decisions and acquire the resources they need to lead a full life. Marginality indicates a lack of such power and is crucial in exploring the impact of social divisions such as gender, age, ethnicity, disability on experiences of social and environmental justice. Alston and Whittenbury (2012) and Dominelli (2012b,c) indicate that women, subject to discrimination in aid distribution are expected to provide any care needed by their families including earning an income if the man cannot do so, or is unavailable. Women also endure increased levels of domestic and sexual violence, even in the camps that are to provide them with refuge (Hirsch, 2012). And, women provide the informal care that covers the gap between formal services and those needed by victim-survivors (Dominelli, 2012b). Additionally, poor men are also ignored in aid processes (Dominelli, 2014). When men lose their livelihoods, few specific provisions are provided to retrain them and equip them for new positions. Consequently, many hang about their communities, drinking alcohol, fighting with each other and becoming violent against women and children. A Sri Lankan villager interviewed for the *Internationalising Institutional and Professional Practices (IIPP)* said:(1):

‘Our boys were very good, they helped others who came to clear the dirt, bury the bodies, and clean the houses. Some of the young people had lost their boats and fishing things and they were sad. Some bad things also happened. Some of the boys got to drink arrack and began to fight’.

In traditional patriarchal cultures where men play the provider role, helping them retain this purpose can save face and facilitate their capacity to support their families. A wish to change patriarchal relations through aid was not mentioned as a goal by any of the IIPP participants, and cannot be imposed by outsiders. Some women changed

their role within particular families, it was always within the context of not transforming patriarchal relations. Roles tended to alter as a by-product of securing family livelihoods. This is exemplified by a group of women who worked on their own income generation project eventually arranging their own visit to the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy - an iconic place for Buddhists. While these women acted out of traditional roles, they did not challenge their place or role within the family through this activity.

Other victim-survivors are disempowered when receiving aid that is inappropriate and which does not involve them in reconstructing their community (Hancock, 1991; Hoogvelt 2007; Dominelli, 2014). Such interventions disempower aid recipients and waste scarce resources. Culturally inappropriate aid is revealed by this IIPP villager commenting on housing construction following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami claims:

‘...in my area we have a two kitchens...one is for the vegetarian and other one is non vegetarian....But [the donors] with...the funds, the people [designing the] architecture, did not engage the people. They planned on their own....[so] after the tsunami it was entirely an utter failure. ’. (Dominelli,2014:4)

Top-down approaches to aid distribution and delivery exclude local residents services as indicated above, and encourage dependency on aid ‘handouts’ as an IIPP aid worker states:

‘[The] community has potential [and] has resource[s] to develop....The problem is when people are not motivated and not empowered to do so....People [rely] on dependency. It is the dependency [which is a problem]’. (Dominelli, 2014: 4).

This interviewee described the growth in ‘bottom-up’ approaches to aid distribution as a result of lessons learnt during the 2004 Tsunami Egalitarian social relations, community engagement and the full involvement of local residents and their organisations is an integral part of green social work. As a villager interviewed for the IIPP project suggested, ‘We should respect the local cultural community to decide their own needs’. Doing so facilitate the coproduction of solutions to

community-defined problems, and the delivery of culturally relevant and locality specific interventions that they own.

Moreover, community residents are usually the first to assist in a disaster. They are on the spot and know the urgency of response. Women, members are quickly charged with caring for others as best they can, as exemplified by a villager interviewed for the IIPP project:

‘a women’s organization [name of organisation] in [village]...are [all] volunteers. They responded...immediately after tsunami. They pooled their own rice and everything and they cooked a meal and delivered it [to community members]’ (Dominelli, 2014: 5).

Women’s help is central to community survival at every stage of the disaster cycle from prevention, immediate relief, recovery, reconstruction and back to prevention, but are rarely recognised as such (Pittaway et al., 2007).

Socially Just Practice

Socially just practice analyses socio-economic issues holistically and covers a number of issues including the ability to: earn a decent living wage when selling one’s labour; clear debris after disasters; establish new forms of social production, reproduction and consumption that provide for the needs of all residents on an equitable basis; protect the physical environment from rapacious exploitation that benefits the few; secure healthy environments in which individuals and groups can flourish and grow; receive care and give it without becoming bankrupt in the process; use education to raise consciousness about reducing demands on the physical environment; and ensure sustainability that protects the interests of future generations of people, flora and fauna alongside an equitable distribution of the earth’s bounty.

From a green social work perspective, socially just practice integrates environmental and social justice in preventing disasters, preparing for them and responding to them (Dominelli, 2012). Social injustice results from barriers that block an individual from obtaining opportunities and resources to develop and participate fully in the social life of a community or society. Environmental justice is concerned with ensuring that

the physical environment is respected and cared for so that people's needs can be met without over consuming resources for future residents. Care of the environment retains the earth's capacity to sustain human life now and in the future and is at odds with neoliberal forms of social development that exploit resources to provide profits for the wealthy few. Globalisation has focused on profit maximization and perpetrated environmental injustice by turning poor communities into toxic waste dumps that jeopardise their health while wealthy people live in healthy environments surrounded by green trees, grass and flowers.

To tackle these concerns, green social workers require knowledge about housing, income generation, health issues, and global neoliberal capitalist development. To deepen their understanding of their relevance for and impact upon local communities, these practitioners can read articles on globalisation, socio-economic development and macro-level decision-making in international corporations. Corporate decisions about investments, production, reproduction, withdrawal to other locations, consumption capacities in a community, and local capabilities in caring for or reclaiming the use of the physical environment, are topics meriting study by green social workers.

Neoliberalism has yet to recover from one of the worst fiscal crisis since the 1930s. The failure of states to control multinationals and guarantee residents the opportunity to earn a living wage is compounded by its own actions. State-induced poverty is rising through public expenditure cuts and policy changes deleterious to human well-being (Dominelli, 2014). These include : reduced benefit levels for those eligible; withdrawn eligibility from groups requiring services by redefining eligibility criteria, e.g., removing under-25 year olds from housing benefit; excluding people from accessing services by categorizing them as 'undeserving' claimants, e.g., immigrants from Eastern Europe; and introducing service user charges and private provisions in a market-place from which millions are excluded because they lack funds to purchase goods and services.

The British government's promotion of personalisation and modernisation has not eliminated these bleak prospects for service users. Personalisation sought to 'modernise' public services by giving service users greater choice and control over their specific services by receiving personal budgets whereby they could purchase

whatever services they wished. These budgets are capped and service users become responsible for paying the salary, national insurance contributions and taxes of any person they 'employ' to provide a service. Doing all of this is intellectually and financially challenging because service users are having to 'do more with less'. Yet, in 2012 the global socio-economic order had 1,645 individual billionaires with an unprecedented value of \$US6.7 trillion living in unparalleled luxury, while 3 billion survived on less than \$US2-00 per day (Kroll and Fass, 2011; Dolan and Kroll, 2014).

This super-rich group will change as China, India and Russia have challenged American dominance of the billionaires' list. After being second for 4 consecutive years, Bill Gates has become the richest man in the world. Gender inequality prevails among this elite as only 152 among the total number of billionaires were women, with the one holding less than half the amount held by Bill Gates. Women are over-represented among the world's poor, comprising approximately 70 per cent of these ranks. Inequality is also growing between countries and within countries (Hardoon, 2014). Additionally, while one billion people over-consume food, one billion people starve with hunger and another one billion are malnourished while food prices rise. One billion people live in houses lacking clean drinking water, 2.6 billion are without sanitation and 1.6 billion people have no electricity. A further 15 million people die annually because drugs for curable diseases are unaffordable and/or inaccessible to them (*Newsweek*, 4-11 June 2012: 49). These gross inequalities underpin the green social work critique of the socio-economic status quo and capitalist market-based models of development.

This development also damages health. Chatham-Stephens et al (2013) analysed 373 toxic waste sites in India, Indonesia and the Philippines and revealed that around 8.6 million people were exposed to dangerous levels of lead, asbestos, hexavalent chromium and other hazardous materials. Women and children were among the most vulnerable groups. Moreover, the products producing these wastes are typically *not* consumed in the communities that suffer the consequences, especially in human health and reproduction. The precarious health status of local residents is exacerbated by under-nutrition and susceptibility to infectious diseases prevalent there. These unequal outcomes in health provide ammunition for green social workers to argue that concentrating scientific energy on cleaning up toxic wastes, finding ways of meeting human needs that are more sustainable and renewable, and utilising indigenous

knowledges of how planet earth should be treated, are matters of urgency. In Canada, First Nations people teach communities to act as custodians of the earth rather than as consumers, and prioritise using only the resources absolutely necessary to meet today's needs so that tomorrow's needs might also be met.

There are glimmers of hope. The United Nations (UN) has initiated a programme under the UN Global Compact, UN Environment Programme and UNFCCC (Framework Convention on Climate Change) that began to work with commercial companies on a voluntary basis to reduce carbon emissions and work with local communities to improve their commitment to sustainable development. Although whether this voluntary initiative will succeed remains unknown, there is money to be made by investing in renewable energy and products, e.g., solar cookers to replace wood or dung burning ones in many industrialising countries. Thus green technologies may become subverted by market discipline in future.

Population dynamics are also important to sustainability. The earth lacks the resources necessary for 10 billion or more people (the UN's projected population later this century) to enjoy North American levels of consumption, so reductions in consumption for those who over-consume are required. Sustainable socio-economic development, education, sustainable livelihoods, birth control, the development of health, social welfare and social care policies to protect an ageing population all have a role to play in ensuring that there is an equitable use of the earth's resources for now and in the future. Population growth will also impact upon migratory movements of people, especially if environmentally degraded environments and climate change have not been controlled.

Socially just practice is complex, but essential for green social workers. They can deliver this goal if they work in collaborative, egalitarian partnerships with local residents and organisations by coproducing knowledge and innovation for sustainable development.

Role of Green Social Workers

Green social workers have a critical role to play in securing social and environmental justice. Below, we summarise the roles that social workers can play in securing social

and environmental justice and promoting resilience before, during and after disasters according to equitable and ethically sound principles (Dominelli, 2012a):

- *Doing no harm* to people, the planet's flora, fauna or physical environment;
- *Consciousness-raising* whereby practitioners discuss possible scenarios about reducing greenhouse gases, developing alternative models of sustainable socio-economic development and acting as cultural interpreters who facilitate discussions across disciplines, organisations and societies that are culturally embedded;
- *Lobbying* for preventative measures such as housing construction to take account of local conditions, traditions and resources; and for policy changes that facilitate access to green technologies, equitable sharing of resources regardless of country boundaries and tackle (hu)man-induced climate change nationally and internationally;
- *Mobilising* communities to reduce carbon emissions and care for the physical environment;
- *Coproducing* solutions by engaging communities of scientific experts and local residents to share their respective knowledge and coproduce new solutions to identified problems;
- *Dialoguing* with physical scientists, other professionals and policymakers, and using the media to change policies locally, nationally and internationally; and
- *Developing* curricula that cover climate change, sustainable development and disaster interventions that build individual and community resiliences.

All peoples have a responsibility to act as custodians of the earth, to ensure that it develops and evolves rather than being subjected to exploitative extraction of its resources. By acknowledging that people and the ecosystem are interlinked, people are enabled to collaborate in ecological partnerships that enable both to flourish. This enables people to live in harmony with nature and meet their needs. Otherwise, meeting people's needs will jeopardise the planet's fragility and make their own existence even more precarious. Green social work is a challenge to all practitioners. Can social workers rise to this challenge? My answer is an unequivocal, 'Yes, we can. Yes, we must'.

Greening Social Work in China

Given China's unsustainable model of development and its ensuing environmental crises, how can China's social work profession respond to this challenge? How can social workers connect with local communities to develop more sustainable social developments? How can social work professionals influence state policy to take seriously sustainability in environmental change?

Green Social Work in China: Unlocking a Paradigm Shift

Despite the seriousness of the environmental crises in China, the majority of social work educators and practitioners ignore environmental issues and are unaware of its importance to the social work profession. Addressing this requires a consciousness-raising or educational dimension. Green social workers can provide training and presentations in different universities in China. The audiences, including educators and students, often raise similar questions: 'Is environment a target of social work intervention?' 'Are environmental issues part of professional practice?' 'Do green social workers promote organic farming, rural cooperative and fair trade?' 'How are such activities linked to mainstream social work practice?' These questions arise because there are few courses or subjects talking about environment issues in the social work curriculum today. Even in subject areas like rural social work and social development, green or ecological perspective are lacking.

Green social work repositions the social work profession by calling for new mission and vision in 21st century. It provides social workers with a new perspective that links social justice with environmental justice, interrogates structural inequalities in the context of environmental change and understands the impact of environment degradation on wellbeing of people and the community. We recommend that the China Social Work Education Association integrates the new paradigm of green social work into its formal curriculum to keep pace with rapid social and environment change. Such a shift is necessary for social work students and practitioners to become well-prepared for the scale of disasters endemic to China. It would help them acquire a sense of environmental justice, and develop suitable, locality specific and culturally relevant interventions with the people and communities affected by disasters or other forms of environmental degradations. With adequate training, they can also acquire legitimacy and a position in providing advice to the Chinese government in facing

tone of environmental related issues.

Policy Advocacy

The current environmental crisis in China has energised citizens' activism and resulted in a questioning of government decisions that are perceived as environmentally damaging. There were over 50,000 environmental protests in China during 2012 (Bradsher, 2012; Hoffman & Sullivan, 2015). Additionally, China's environmental protest movement began in the late 2000s as a predominantly rural-based movement. Since then, it has shifted, to becoming an urban-based one. These developments are of concern to China's top leadership, which views such unrest as a threat to the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy. As Nakano and Yang (2014) said, 'Air pollution in China has turned into a major social problem and its mitigation has become a crucial political challenge for the country's political leadership'. The government has attempted to respond reassuringly to these public outcries. For example, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang declared a 'war on pollution, in March 2014. In May of that year, the government strengthened the country's Environmental Protection Law for the first time in twenty-five years. Such moves reflect 'a changing understanding within China about the relationship between economic development and societal wellbeing' (Economy and Levi, 2014: 99).

But who can give Chinese government good advice embedded in the relevant communities to deal with the environment crises? The government seems to be very cautious about the environmental NGOs which it has labelled as 'radical' and therefore, inappropriate (Zhou, 2013). It is easy for the government to seek a managerialist way of responding to climate and environmental disasters, like focusing on adjustments to predicted impacts, presuming enhanced climate science will reduce uncertainties, prioritizing expert knowledge, individualizing resilience and adaption, and so on. Most of time, state policy neglects the social complexities of environmental issues and the importance of drawing upon community expertise in resolving these problems. Green social work provides social workers a holistic approach to rethink the political economy of environmental development and growth and understand that transformative change should be dependent on government, institutional and community support, all acting together within a respectful, co-productive and egalitarian framework. Social work can fill a significant knowledge

gap and bring the complexities of the social/environmental nexus into macro-level understandings of climate challenges and give government concrete advice based on practice of green social work embedded in specific communities. Also, green social work help policy maker to think more clearly about: How to create safe and sustainable physical environments for all? How to create policy solutions that are both sustainable and fair, where people feel supported and where socially just solutions are inherent within the outcomes?

Actually, green social work can support the policy direction of Chinese government, particularly its commitment to the international Sendai Framework on Disaster Reduction and the Sustainable Development Goals it supports. On 27th January 2016, the Chinese government released the No. 1 document, entitled *Opinions on the implementation of the new concepts of development to accelerate agricultural modernization and to achieve the goal of building a comprehensive well-off society*. The main content includes continuous action to: consolidate the foundation of modern agriculture; improve the quality and efficiency of agriculture; enhance resource protection and ecological restoration; promote agricultural green development; promote rural industry; sustained and rapid growth of farmers' income; promote harmonious urban and rural relationships; improve the level of new rural construction; further promote rural reform; enhance the internal capacity for rural development; and strengthen and improve Communist Party's leadership of rural development.

Using examples of good green social work practice, it is possible to advocacy for policy changes at central government level. For example, our research in rural China not only exposed the problem of agricultural development in China, especially the issue food security, but also organized the farmer cooperative to return to organic rice production, set up fair trade market, and built up consumer network in city to support the development of green agriculture. Apart from practicing green social work in terms of alternative rural development via action research, we also moved forward to do policy advocacy in China. In 2015, we submitted a proposal of protecting China's traditional seed to Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (全国政协).

Social Work Practice with a Green Perspective

Green social work provides us a new perspective in understanding the linkages

between social justice and environmental justice. It provides a framework for social workers to work towards environmental sustainability and which in return benefits human well-being. Taking one of our rural development projects in Yunnan province as an example, green social work has provided a framework to guide our practice in different way.

In 2001, Hok Bun Ku and his colleague came to a Zhuang ethnic minority village which was officially classified by the Chinese government as a ‘poor’ village because the villagers were unable to support themselves in meeting basic needs for food and clothing. Many households in the village suffered from food shortages for between four and six months every year. When we initiated the project titled “A Study of a Capacity Building Model for Poverty Alleviation in a Chinese Village – the Case of Yunan”, we found that many villagers, especially those living in mountainous areas where the soil is poor, had to pay an exorbitant amount of interest on the money they had borrowed to buy food. And, many children in the village were denied educational opportunities because they could not afford to pay school fees. If we did not have the green social work perspective, we would have easily adopted the conventional way that the local government had attempted to combat poverty. For example, the local government had encouraged farmers to grow cash crops (e.g. broad bean, potato, and ginger), engage in agricultural development in winter, and make structural adjustments. However, commercialization of agriculture and integration into the global capitalist market made these farmers even more vulnerable, getting themselves deeper in financial hardship, for example, Ku (2011) and Ku & Ip (2011).

Such mainstream agriculture development has three unsustainable aspects: economic, environmental and cultural. On the economic dimension, when farmers shift to produce commodity crops, they rely on market to get high yielding seeds, chemical fertilizer and pesticide. These increase their production costs substantially, especially when the market price of these products increase every year. The monopoly of big capital, market price fluctuations, and exploitation by middle-man also make farmers’ livelihood unsustainable because high production costs are combined with low market prices for food crops. Regarding the environmental aspect, the heavy use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, weeding liquids, even genetic modified seeds cause water and soil pollution and in return threaten food safety and people’s health (Jiang, 2016;

Cressey, 2015). Also mass mono-production of cash crop like potato affects biodiversity. On the cultural element, farmers lost their traditional skills and confidence in the modernization of agriculture. In the village, the most drastic change, however, came from the local government's 'green revolution' initiatives. Driven by good intention and conceptualized as a strategy to assist local farmers to generate more income and reduce poverty, the local government had been strongly encouraging the villagers to switch from growing rice to growing ginger because ginger was able to fetch a much higher price on the market. Consequently, virgin forests were cleared for producing ginger, causing much ecological damage. However, the market was unpredictable. In 2004, the market price was good, around 2 *yuan* purchasing price per *jin*². Suddenly the ginger market collapsed to 0.8 *yuan* in the following year as there was an oversupply nationally. Prices dropped dramatically to a level where farmers could not even recoup their production costs, let alone generate sufficient income to pay for food and basic daily expenses. We found that many villagers, especially those living in mountainous areas where the soil is poor, had to pay an exorbitant amount of interest on the money they had borrowed to buy food. Due to economic loss, their children were also denied educational opportunities because they could not afford to pay fees. In short, they were let down by the promises of the new market economy – they were made to feel their traditional values and life skills were irrelevant, and when they felt no longer confident in mastering their livelihoods in agricultural production, they also lost their self-esteem and identity (Ku, 2011). A common lamentation among the older villagers was that,

“We Zhuang people are good at farming. We never thought that after farming for our entire life, we would suddenly find ourselves not knowing what and how to grow things. Whatever we decide to grow these days somehow does not seem to meet what the market needs.” (Ku & Ip, 2011:238)

The predicament faced by the villagers first came to our attention in 2002 when we were working on some cultural preservation projects in their village. However, it was not until 2005, inspired by the idea similar to green social work, we began to start a cross-disciplinary (e.g. anthropologist, designer, social work, agricultural specialist, and natural scientist) participatory action research, to encourage local villagers to return to organic farming, produce arts and crafts, using local resources for urban

² Jin is a unit of weight (=1/2 kilogram).

green consumption while simultaneously helping locals in generating additional income, preserving and revitalizing their cultural pride and identity, protecting soil and seed, fostering community participation, strengthening community life and cohesion, and ultimately, buffering the corrosive forces of globalization.

Green social work let us understand the structural factors that cause environmental disasters and their significant social and gendered consequences. Green social work also gives social workers' insights in the search for emancipatory alternatives which can inform our practical strategies for social transformation. The concept of 'social economy' is an option which has a clear vision 'to put the economy at the service of human beings, rather than putting human beings at the service of the economy' (Neamtan 2010, p. 241). This emphasizes social justice, democracy and collectivism. The social economy highlights links to the well-being of different economic subjects (e.g. producers, consumers, inhabitants of a local community) and to humankind (e.g. impacts on cultural or environmental commons). Adding the green social work perspective to this scenario adds environmental and sustainability considerations to bring social and environmental justice together.

In our view, China's economic development must return to society and gradually shift from a market-driven development to a people-centered and environmental friendly development. Instead of freely allowing capital to intrude into rural society, commodifying farmland and subsequently dispossess peasants from their means of production and livelihoods, a pluralistic green economic model of rural development, which takes into account the realities of rural areas and builds upon the foundations of rural society, must be promoted and implemented. In contrast to the market economy, green social workers promote a social green economy which is people-centred, community-based, cooperative, democratic, and defined by harmony between people and the environment. Thus, it is a societal system in which production is not for consumption but for servicing the needs of the people while caring for the environment.

The problem of China's market-driven development lies in its inevitable domination by capital, commodification of people and land, and the destruction of society and the environment. Green social work advocates for another model of alternative development which embeds the economy within social relations that take seriously the care of the environment. It is pluralistic, bottom-up, democratic, non-monopolistic,

and truly prioritizes the developmental needs of communities and individuals. Cooperatives (producer and consumer cooperatives), social enterprises, fair trade, community economy, and collective economy are all concrete examples of green social work practice because it intervenes to protect the environment and enhance people's well-being by integrating people and their socio-cultural, economic and physical environments within an egalitarian framework that address prevailing structural inequalities and unequal distribution of power and resources (Dominelli, 2012). We think it has much to offer China in addressing its environmental crises.

After 30 years of planned economy and another 30 years of market economy, China is facing the huge pressure of simultaneously developing economically and socially. Green social work, whether in practice or in exploration, could be the new route for China's sustainable development. It is time for China's social workers to assume professional responsibility to tackle environmental issues and understand that environment degradation impacts badly on the wellbeing of people and community, especially the disadvantaged and marginalized groups within it. Social work education in China needs to rethink how to integrate green social work into the mainstream curriculum because social work students and social work practitioners need to have environmental sensitivity and knowledge of how environmental injustice exacerbates inequality and undermine people's livelihoods.

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